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ABSTRACT

This paper describes two studies from the Intersegmental Project to Assure Student Success (IPASS), which were conducted to determine whether instructional paradigms can be linked to student outcomes. The research has shown that success in the first English class, at any level, is a clear indicator of the interest and ability of college students to continue further collegiate study. To explore the differences between teaching methodologies, 50 English instructors at two community colleges were surveyed. Questions garnered opinions regarding student preparation, types of assignments, ratings of skills, and other pedagogical concerns. Results include: (1) 74% of instructors reported that their professional training had included a course on pedagogy; (2) only 87% of teachers whose primary course of instruction was College English reported taking courses about teaching writing; and (3) there were noticeable differences between those teaching different course levels--instructors teaching primarily college English were more likely to have had a course on pedagogy than those teaching a level below. Another survey, of 27 IPASS instructors, gathered information on the use of student feedback. It found that peer feedback is used less at the remedial (where it is most needed) than at other levels. Three tables cover: (1) first English coursework by level; (2) distribution of students in sections where peer feedback was used; and (3) peer feedback and student outcomes--first English level. (EMH)

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Instructor Attitudes, Curriculum Content and Student Success: A Multi-Layered, Multi-Method Exploration of Developmental Instruction

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Abstract

During the past year, the authors have developed a detailed model for student tracking, the STAR system, that they employed to research remedial English students at three colleges in a large urban district. As part of the Intersegmental Project to Assure Student Success (IPASS), the presenters have integrated survey data, action research, and content analyses with tracking data as part of an effort to improve English and math instruction.

The results of instructor surveys conducted at two colleges and content analyses of their respective courses were analyzed with regard to the pedagogical and attitudinal variations displayed in the survey data and their effects on student success in English. Noticeable differences in approaches were found between instructors teaching different levels of English. Grouping instructors who reported use of peer feedback (as one of the measures of a less traditional teaching style that might be termed "constructivist" or "learning centered") differences were found in the success rates at two of three levels of English studied. The greatest differences were at the remedial or basic skills level, yet fewer instructors at that level reported utilizing this technique. The wealth of information continuing from this study will be further examined and presented in the future.

Introduction

Since 1996 the three researchers have been studying the English progression and course-taking patterns of community college students, including basic skills and English as a second language students. A 1998 Spencer Foundation research grant laid the foundation for the current Fund for Student Success-sponsored Intersegmental Project to Assure Student Success (IPASS), a research collaborative investigating the fate and progress of pre-collegiate basic skills students across discipline and institutional boundaries. Most recently, the course-taking behavior and educational progression of community college students in their further education at four-year institutions has become a primary focus of IPASS. Results from the 1998 Spencer study of student outcomes led to a second IPASS activity: Examining the teaching practices and syllabi of instructors at two community colleges to determine whether instructional paradigms can be linked to student outcomes. This presentation at the April 2000 Research and Planning conference attempts to answer the following questions:

1) How important is success in English at the community college to the completion of higher education goals?
2) Are there significant differences between groups of students' successes based on English instruction methodology experienced in the community college?
3) Do surveys of English instructors reveal teaching methodologies that vary or conflict with their syllabi?
4) Can classroom-based action research provide instruments of change and increased student learning with further educational success?

The Importance of Success in English

Our research has shown quite clearly that success in the first English class, at any level, is a clear indicator of the interest and ability of college students to continue further collegiate study. The following figure illustrates how those students failing their first English course, be that at a basic skills, ESL, or college English level, are far less likely to complete additional course units. The importance of correct assessment and the impact of the initial English course is evident.

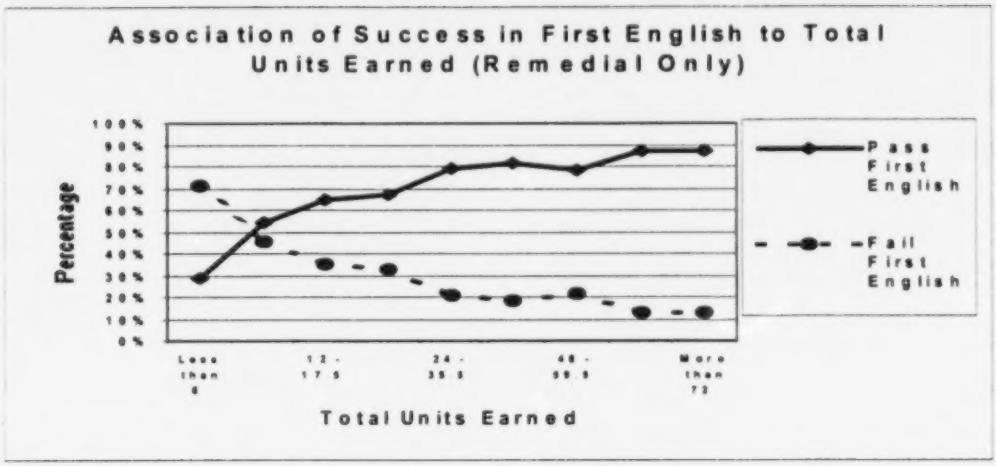

Figure 1. (Source: IPASS Longitudinal Tracking File, Central College 1992-1994 Cohort)

Comparison of Teaching Methodologies with Syllabi Evidence

To explore the differences between teaching methodologies, both in practice and as espoused, 50 English instructors were surveyed at two different community colleges. Instructors were asked to respond to questions based on the course level they typically teach. 33% responded as College English instructors, 17% at one level below (AA/AS level), 17% at the basic skills level, and 28% as English as a Second Language instructors. Their years of teaching ranged from less than 2 years (17%) to more than 15 years experience (26%). Survey questions included opinions regarding student preparation, types of assignments, ratings of skills, frequency of teaching particular skills, numbers of assignments by type, and conferencing topics. Instructors were also asked whether they used certain types of written feedback, such as comments about content, peer feedback, grading of drafts and others. Types of peer feedback were also rated.

74% of instructors reported that their professional training had included a course on pedagogy; 84% a course in language learning; 55% a course about curriculum development; 74% a course about teaching writing; 50% a course about teaching ESL; and 72% had participated in a teaching practicum.

Initial results of surveys revealed instructors were fairly consistent within disciplines regarding the importance of various skills. There were noticeable differences between those teaching different course levels. Instructors teaching primarily College English were more likely to have had a course on pedagogy (80% compared to 62%) than those teaching one level below. Instructors teaching English as a Second Language were far more likely to have had a course about language learning (92%) than any other group. Curriculum development courses were less frequent experiences for basic skills instructors than any other group. These differences in teaching styles across disciplines were more significant than variations between espoused practices and syllabi.

Interestingly, only 87% of instructors whose primary course of instruction was College English reported a course about teaching writing. In this area, the one course below college English

(AA/AS level) reported the most experience, with 100% of the 9 instructors responding that they had taken such a course. It should be noted that in nearly all other training questions, this group of AA/AS instructors reported the least training with the notable exception of being more likely to have participated in a teaching practicum.

Many instructors who did not identify themselves as primarily ESL instructors had had a course about teaching ESL. As much as 62% of the basic skills instructors answered affirmatively. (The wisdom of basic skills instructors being versed in instructing ESL students is evident since many ESL students also take basic skills courses.) Interestingly, 15% of the ESL instructors reported that they had not had a course about teaching ESL writing.

The relationship between instructional style and student outcomes.

Grubb and Associates (1999) identify two primary directions of instructional style. The first and most common approach has received many different labels: "...behaviorist, passive, teacher-centered, didactic..." and is commonly thought of as the "traditional" approach. This approach emphasizes students copying the actions of the instructor who in turn breaks complex practices into component skills and directs drills on the mastery of these subskills. The second fundamental approach centers on enabling students to create meaning or interpretation for themselves. This approach has been referred to broadly as "progressive", "constructivist", "holistic", or "active". Students are encouraged to be active creators of knowledge rather than passive information-recipients from instructors. Instructors implement this pedagogical approach through a variety of strategies among which one finds an emphasis on discussion rather than lecture, reading whole texts rather than materials exemplary of a subskill, writing purposeful essays drawn from the students' life experiences, peer feedback, and others.

Our purpose here is to examine the outcomes of students in relationship to the teaching styles of the instructors with whom they took remedial English and, insofar as possible, at succeeding levels. We will use one primary item from a survey administered to 27 instructors who are participating in IPASS: the use of student feedback.

Peer Feedback and Outcomes in First English Attempted

To evaluate the research question we have combined an analysis of response patterns to the IPASS Instructor Survey in relation to the outcomes of the students who took courses with the identified instructors. The student outcomes were analyzed on the basis of a student tracking file that contains the complete enrollment records for Central College for the period beginning Fall 1990 through Spring 1999.

Twenty-seven instructors at Central College completed the IPASS Instructor Survey. Over the course of the Fall 1990-Spring 1999 period these instructors had a total of 14,117 students. This analyses combines the instructor survey responses with students' outcomes within the English progression itself. Those survey elements that most directly refer to a participatory style are the frequency of: (v44) in-class discussion of reading; (v45) peer feedback sessions; (v46) student oral presentations, and the use of (v105) peer feedback, (v106) structured peer feedback, and (v107) open-ended peer feedback. In particular, the student outcomes in relation to one item

from the instructor survey—the use of peer feedback—were analyzed. 7,899 students took their first English (excluding ESL and courses given in the Developmental Communications Department) with one of the instructors who completed the IPASS instructor survey. The distribution by English level is given in Table 1.

Table 1. First English Coursework by Level

Remedial	1583	20.04%
AA Level	2877	36.42%
UC Composition	1604	20.31%
Other	1835	23.23%
Total	7899	100.00%

Table 2 shows that the use of peer feedback was less common at the remedial level of instruction than at the AA and transfer levels. 55.4% of the students who began English at the lower level had instructors who reported using it, compared with 69.2% of the students starting at the AA and 69.7% at the transfer composition level.

Table 2. Distribution of Students in Sections Where Peer Feedback Used

	No Peer Feedback		Peer Feedback		
	N	%	N	%	
Remedial	699	46.69%	798	53.31%	1497
AA Level	876	30.07%	2037	69.93%	2913
UC Composition	477	30.34%	1095	69.66%	1572
Other	142	8.26%	1577	91.74%	1719
Total	2194	28.49%	5507	71.51%	7701

From our ongoing research we know that failure in first English, at any level, is strongly associated with extremely low levels of total unit-completion during the course of college attendance, a period that is likewise extremely short for the students who do not get past their first English courses. We also have found that failure rates in remedial English are significantly higher than at other levels of English instruction. The linking of instructor survey data to the outcomes of the cohorts they instructed adds an element that complements and extends this picture. Table 3 shows the results of the cross tabulation of the outcome of the students' first English course with the instructor's use of peer feedback. Whereas this association is not significant at the AA and transfer levels it is significant at the remedial level.

Hence, we find the paradoxical situation that peer feedback is used less at the remedial than at other levels and that remedial level students experience greater success where peer feedback is used. This finding suggests research that moves from statistical information into the practical world of the classroom itself.

Table 3. Peer Feedback and Student Outcome--First English Level

Peer Feedback	Successful		Unsuccessful		Total
	N	%	N	%	
	Remedial Level				
Yes	525	73.8%	186	26.2%	711
No	453	64.8%	246	35.2%	699
Chi-square = 13.53 prob < 0.001					
	AA Degree Level				
Yes	1287	80.5%	312	19.5%	1599
No	377	77.7%	108	22.3%	485
Chi-square = 1.756 prob 0.185					
	UC/CSU Transfer Level				
Yes	919	83.9%	176	16.1%	1095
No	405	84.9%	72	15.1%	477
Chi-square = 0.24 prob 0.625					

Classroom-Based Action Research Results

To complement and extent the mostly institutional research sponsored by IPASS, an action research program was begun at one of the colleges. Instructors of developmental classes in English and math met with one of the researchers to develop their own approaches to learning enhancement for their students. A variety of concerns and approaches are currently being formulated, articulated, and analyzed.

Action research is a form of practitioner research that starts with a key question: How can I improve the learning experiences of my students? Practitioners reflect on their practice, focus and identify a concern and research it. They try out a new approach or innovation they have uncovered in their research, observe and reflect on the results, and start the whole action research cycle over again. Participating English, ESL, and math instructors have attended an orientation meeting, identified and ranked concerns, and gone through a process to focus on researchable questions. They are encouraged to keep an action research journal and attend monthly action research meetings.

Instructors ranked class size, underprepared, overloaded and over-committed students, cheating, heterogeneous classes and limited support for both instruction (copies, materials, multi-media) and students (tutoring, supplemental instruction) as their most important concerns. They also expressed concerns that faculty members do not teach the same material or enforce the same standards.

Instructors have started action research projects related to cheating, to the effectiveness of supplemental math instruction and have started a number of projects investigating the effectiveness of various types of feedback in writing instruction (peer feedback, instructor feedback, self-evaluation protocols, supplemental instruction by a class mentor/in-class tutor).

Further study is planned within the next year of the grant expanding action research to an additional college. A survey of students' perceptions of teaching methodologies is planned for the purposes of matching their perceptions with the espoused practices of instructors and their syllabi. It is expected that focus groups with instructors and students may be of benefit after the comparisons are formulated. It is hoped that these groups may lead to an expansion of action research ideas for instructors.

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